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SUBJECT: GEORGIA: OPPOSITION PROMISED SURPRISES - PATRIARCH DELIVERS

REF: TBILISI 957

Classified By: AMBASSADOR JOHN F. TEFFT. REASONS: 1.4 (B) AND (D).

¶1. (C) Summary: On Georgian Independence Day, May 26, the non-parliamentary opposition drew its largest crowd since beginning protests on April 9. Between 45,000-50,000 rallied at Dynamo Stadium, where various non-parliamentary opposition leaders spoke to a largely subdued audience. Only singer Utsnobi (Giorgi Gachechiladze) and Labor Party Leader Shalva Natelashvili received loud cheers. Utsnobi, who appears to have become the defacto leader of the protests, urged the crowd to march to Trinity Cathedral and remain there until Georgian Patriarch Ilia II told them what to do next. The non-parliamentary opposition followed suit and attempted to co-opt the highly respected Patriarch to their cause by laying down an ultimatum to publicly support them. With 15,000 gathered at the Cathedral, the Patriarch indicated that he did not support the non-parliamentary opposition's agenda or tactics, and pointedly rejected the notion that Saakashvili should step down. Later in front of Parliament, numerous opposition leaders responded by dismissing the Patriarch's comments as unimportant, and criticizing Georgia's most revered figure for being a captive of the government. The parliamentary rally devolved into chaos highlighted by a number of verbal and even physical scuffles breaking out on stage between different opposition camps. After some deliberation, non-parliamentary leaders led approximately 1000 protesters to blocked train tracks at the main Tbilisi station for about 3 hours delaying one train. Disagreement seems to be growing among non-parliamentary opposition leaders, and plans remain unclear. Radical leaders, including Nino Burjanadze, Eka Beselia, and Salome Zourabashvili, have vowed to block major highways, rail junctions, and the airport. Others have remained largely silent, and some continue to engage in dialogue. The Ambassador continues to facilitate these discussions and has committed his good offices to those participating in dialogue. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Comment: In attacking the Patriarch, the non-parliamentary opposition has attacked a respected and influential Georgian institution, revered by all levels of society. This is a move that will likely further denigrate the opposition in the eyes of the population, and appears to be a major political miscalculation. The numerous, heated arguments between different opposition leaders and their camps at Parliament and the train station show that differences on tactics and future plans is beginning to grow.

In one fell swoop, the Patriarch seems to have removed the only issue that united the disparate non-parliamentary opposition - Saakashvili's resignation. The recriminations have already begun, leaving an apparent and increasingly public rift between those who want to continue escalation led by Nino Burjanadze (Democratic Movement - United Georgia), Eka Beselia (United Georgia), and Salome Zourabichvili (Georgia's Way), and those, including Irakli Alasania and possibly the Gachechiladze brothers, who now seem to see dialogue as the only way out. End Comment.

Protest Large - For Some A Diversion

¶3. (C) Embassy observers estimated the crowd of predominately male over the age of 45 at between 45,000-50,000 at its peak. Labor leader Shalva Natelashvili's victory lap around the stadium received wide applause, while other non-parliamentary leaders entered to a smattering of applause and proceeded directly to a holding room after giving interviews. (Embassy note: Natelashvili has not participated in the daily protests since April 9 and probably deserves much of the credit for bringing in additional supporters to the stadium rally. End note.) Utsnobi arrived an hour late with roughly 100-200 protesters from his week long trip through Western Georgia to a raucous welcome. Utsnobi was carried into the stadium on the shoulders of supporters, often wiping his eyes in a "show" of emotion. Utsnobi's "emotions" ran over when he hopped the barrier to run onto a Georgian flag in the infield first kissing it, then sprawling all over it to the crowd's delight. (Embassy Comment: This over the top political theater led a group of Alasania supporters to walk out of the stadium in disgust, according to one participant. End Comment.) Various non-parliamentary leaders gave speeches to modest response when Utsnobi returned to the stage to tell the crowd to march to Trinity Cathedral where they would stay until the Patriarch "told them which road to follow". (Embassy Comment: Utsnobi met with the Patriarch on May 25 but Post has no information as to what was discussed. The non-parliamentary opposition sent a delegation to the Patriarchate on May 26, but our sources indicated that they received nothing more than a perfunctory response. End Comment).

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March to Trinity Cathedral - Patriarch's Statement

¶4. (C) The uphill march to Trinity Cathedral reduced the crowd to roughly 15,000 protesters. From the leadership, only Levan Gachechiladze was seen marching with the protesters while all others took their cars. A number of non-parliamentary leaders attended the already-scheduled mass celebration as did Tbilisi Mayor Gigi Ugalava, who was greeted by the crowd with jeers. The Patriarch, somewhat unexpectedly, said that "(p)art of our population is demanding the President's resignation. I want to say that this issue is so complicated and generally, it has to some extent become a rule in our country, where the first and second president were forced to resign. You know what these resignations have brought to us. Maybe, it would be more correct - it is simply my personal opinion - if we listen to each other, we should be capable to listen to everyone." He then underlined that every person has a right to their own opinion and condemned "categorical thinking" in which a "person can not listen to others and think that the truth lies only in him and his ideas should be implemented." The Patriarch said that Georgians regard those with a different opinion as strangers but should not forget "we are all brothers." Despite it's clear relevance for the population, neither Maestro TV or Kavkasia, both well-known opposition channels, initially reported on the Patriarch's statements, although later both aired his comments in full.

¶5. (C) Outside the cathedral word spread of the Patriarch's address and it's significance. A few protesters on loudspeakers claimed the reports were untrue and a result of GoG provocateurs. Others came out to address the crowd saying the Patriarch's comments were true, but that he was arranging a dialogue between Ugalava and non-parliamentary opposition leaders as to somehow mitigate the effects of the Patriarch's comments. Confusion was the dominant reaction, as heated arguments broke out between protesters around the cathedral until word was passed to proceed immediately to Parliament where opposition leaders would speak about the Patriarch's comments and announce further plans.

Chaos Ensues at Parliament

¶16. (C) An extremely somber, Levan Gachechiladze told the 7,000-8,000 gathered at Parliament that protests would continue, but that consultations on further actions were necessary. Gachechiladze told the crowd to some jeering that he was not the person who would lead them to storm Parliament. At some point, an unidentified speaker took the microphone which was immediately cut off and a heated argument ensued between Gachechiladze and Salome Zourabichvili. The argument resulted in a minor scuffle between their respective supporters. Burjanadze told the crowd she would not step backwards, and dismissed the Patriarch's comments as "(p)robably nobody expected that the Georgian Patriarch would have told us to go and overthrow Saakashvili." Burjanadze called for harsh measures to bring about Saakashvili's resignation. Beselia stated that the Patriarch "would not have made or would not have been allowed to make the statement we (non-parliamentary opposition) wanted." Beselia focused on what the Patriarch did not say, noting that the Patriarch "did not tell us that we should not struggle" to force Saakashvili's resignation. Utsnobi said that "(w)hile blood runs through my veins I will not allow Saakashvili to reign in our country." Utsnobi explained to the crowd that "(t)oday the Georgian Patriarch was taken hostage because he was not allowed to say what he was going to say in his speech. They (the authorities) frightened him and did not let him say what he was going to say. But anyway, we will struggle to the end."

¶17. (C) Various statements, often contradictory in nature, followed with Burjanadze finally telling the crowd that the leaders would announce a new plan in ten minutes. The non-parliamentary leaders then huddled and argued before finally announcing that half of the crowd should remain in front of Parliament while half should go to the train station to block trains. A group of about 1000 protesters led by David Gamkrelidze (Alliance - New Rights), Burjanadze, Zourabichvili, Kakha Kukava (Conservatives), and Beselia arrived at the train station at about 11pm. The group according to MoIA sources decided to block the train station because they feared the crowd was turning on them and wanted to let them "blow off some steam." Arguments between leaders continued at the train station with some leaders telling protesters to leave the track to let the passenger train through, and some protesters refusing to leave the track. After 10 minutes of argument, a small number of protesters were physically removed from the tracks by other protesters. The train then lurched forward only to be stopped by a number of protesters who jumped back on the track. The train shut

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down and did not attempt to proceed until the protesters left some three hours later. The police allowed the protesters to move freely to the train station and to block the tracks; embassy observers saw very few police at the station.

Immediate Fallout

¶18. (C) Echoing the Patriarch's comments, President Saakashvili struck a conciliatory tone and called for dialogue. Saakashvili apologized that at least 50,000 citizens were dismissed from state employment as a result of his reforms, but stressed that the reforms were necessary. He acknowledged that poverty and employment were ongoing problems, and said those in poverty have a right not to be satisfied. He added that even though he disagreed with many political leaders and their behavior, he stressed that while they may not agree with each other on political views, they all love Georgia.

¶19. (C) Following the divergence of several opposition camps on May 26, it appears two camps are starting to emerge, those whose political future depends on a more radical course and

further provocations, and those who are engaging in or considering dialogue. The radical group of Beselia, Burjanadze, and Zourabichvili met at Burjanadze's office early May 27. Zourabichvili said the three would announce its further plans at 6pm the same day. Gamkrelidze, who appears to be moving toward the more radical group said that the "railway blockage was a warning to the authorities" and that more blockages depended on "the authorities' reaction to our demand that negotiations on Saakashvili's resignation be started." Alasania, a nominal Gamkrelidze ally, said he continues to support protests but that he would not take part in blocking highways or railways. Other non-parliamentary leaders largely did not comment on the day's events.

¶10. (SBU) Apparently seeking to make amends, opposition leaders Beselia, Burjanadze and the brothers Gachechiladzes met with the Patriarch May 27, but did not make any comments to the press following the meeting. Salome Zourabichvili reportedly did not know about the meeting. By mid-afternoon May 27, opposition leaders were meeting at the New Rights office, apparently still unable to come up with a plan.
TEFFT